DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 827 EA 018 597

AUTHOR Wooten, Charles L.; Wooten, Sharon M.
TITLE Effective Communication in Educational Policy Development.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the National Institute on Legal Problems of Educating the Handicapped (7th, Charleston, SC, May 4-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Cooperation; *Educational Policy; *Electronic Mail; Futures (of Society); *Organizational Communication; *Participation; *Policy Formation; Special Education; Technological Advancement; Telecommunications
IDENTIFIERS SpecialNet

ABSTRACT

Electronic mail and other telecommunications processes may prove to be valuable tools for the active involvement of educators in legislative and policy development. Involving educators in regulations development could reduce implementation problems significantly. Using electronic media to disseminate policy information to educational agencies and organizations of all types and sizes can enhance the solicitation of individual or group input for policy development at local, regional, state, and national levels. Time delays are limited and costs are held down. SpecialNet is a good example of an electronic mail system that is being used effectively; special education programs use SpecialNet extensively for interprogram communications. The system is also available to other disciplines in education. (PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271827

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Charles L. Wooten

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Effective Communication in Educational Policy Development

A Paper Presented at
The Seventh National Institute on Legal
Problems of Educating the Handicapped

May 4-6, 1986
Charleston, South Carolina

presented by
Charles L. Wooten, Ed.D.

developed by
Charles L. Wooten, Ed.D.
Sharon M. Wooten, Ed.D.

EA 018 597

Abstract

During recent years a new technological method of communicating has evolved. This new approach has been viewed as an alternative to postal service mail, an escape from lengthy (and often expensive) telephone conversations, an inexpensive method for mass communication, a data transfer system, and a host of other applications. Along with all of its other possibilities, electronic mail may prove to be the one most valuable tool of the future to actively involve educators in legislative and policy development. If all educators could have input into regulations development prior to adoption or incorporation into law or rules, many, if not most, problems could be avoided.

Educational agencies and organizations from the United States Office of Education to the smallest local school district and from universities to related agencies all have an opportunity to be involved in education policy development via telecommunication. The bourgeoning use of electronic mail for communicating between and among education personnel has opened a new door. Telecommunication has the potential to significantly change educational policy development procedures. By using the electronic medium as a dissemination tool for policy information, individual or group input can be solicited and/or submitted for policy development or change at the local, regional, state, and national levels. The education community is finding that there are no inherent delays for information exchange via telecommunication, nor are there restraints in time or costs for delivering the information to a vast audience.

To improve their basic communciation system, educators need only avail themselves of existing systems. To have input into regulatory changes that affect their daily lives educators should choose the most versatile of the electronic mail systems available - SpecialNet. SpecialNet is an exemplary mode of telecommunication being used effectively by special education programs to remove the barriers of distance, costs, and other restrictions to improve communication among the constituency. This same system is accessible to all disciplines in education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Interactive Policy Development 1

SpecialNet: An Exemplary Electronic Mail System for Educators 3

Telecommunication 5

Summary 6

References 7

FFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

To propose and substantiate the idea that school districts and other professional practitioners can and should be involved in policy development, this paper presents a concept capable of involving all educators, and the practical aspect of including and incorporating regulatory input from a state or regional constituency for policy development. The actual implementation simply requires using telecommunication as a major vehicle for policy information dissemination and retrieval on a statewide level - a system already existing in many states.

Historically, most educators have not been included in educational policy development at the local or statewide levels. As a general rule, state legislatures, state boards of education, or other governing bodies are presented with proposed policy/legislation that has been sold to them as a bill of goods by special interest groups. These special interest groups may or may not have the best interests of all citizens in mind when developing their proposals. After regulations are enacted many new implications are discovered by those charged with implementing them. The practitioner must sometimes deal with unrealistic bounds or expectations inherent in new, or altered, mandates.

Communication has always been viewed as just another expense in education. Today it is a resource for improving every aspect of the education process from facilities maintenance through legislation. An informed educational constituency makes for better working conditions - which in turn makes for happier teachers - which leads to better instruction - which leads to better student performance - which . . .

Interactive Policy Development

The communication of governmental agencies when proposing legislation or policy is usually done with little or no public awareness of the policy or its possible impact on the general constituency charged with its implementation. With this limited dissemination of information, only the people who are designing the regulation, approving it, or lobbyists - whose sole purpose is to influence the legislation or policy - have an opportunity to be actively involved in the developmental process.

In order to benefit from telecommunication as a medium to influence policy/legislation, it is necessary to be acquainted with the current communication process of governing agencies to recipients, from recipients to governing agencies, and between organizations. Governing agencies generally provide formal correspondence to recipients through the United States Postal Service (USPS) mail. A large volume of the same information sent from governing agencies requires several days, if not weeks or months, to prepare and approve for distribution.

For example, a formal letter from the U.S. Office of Education to all state superintendents authorizing submission of competitive project applications for $50,000,000 would require weeks of preparation. The time savings of telecommunication, in lieu of the United States Postal Service, begins at the point of approval. The formal letter requires signatures, envelopes, duplications, file copies, postage, collation, delivery to the common carrier, sorting by the carrier for re-routing according to destination, delivery to addressee, being recorded in recipients office, and finally routing to the designee. All of the steps from approval by appropriate officials to delivery to intended recipient can take several weeks. The same information can be transmitted electronically in the time it takes to type the information. No copying is required, no additional people need physically handle the information, no labels need be prepared. Telecommunication could make the same information exchange simple and easy. There are inherent time delays in traditional communication systems stemming from holidays and week-ends when delivery is halted to loss of documents and incorrect routing by the carriers or office personnel. Although it is possible to have time delays in electronic communication due to mechanical failure, or lack of use, a total loss of information or a significant time delay is almost non-existent.

Communication from a recipient to the governing agency generally consists of either a formal letter, a long distance telephone call, or both. Oftentimes, an agency or district needs to request clarification or interpretation of a policy issue. Historically, this has been accomplished by a telephone call, followed up by a letter, requesting the necessary information. With the use of telecommunication this can be accomplished very quickly if the agency or district identifies the issue and submits the request electronically. The governing agency can respond within minutes or hours and the requestor can receive a printed response - all within the same day.

The extended school year has been a policy development affecting millions of parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff, bus drivers, service personnel, and custodial and maintenance personnel. The next expansion of services will likely be to extend the school day beyond a sixth or seventh period. To determine the effect of extending the school day to 5:00 p.m., for example, a state education agency could request each school district to present their perception of the positive and negative effects of proposed policy to lengthen the school day. Issues to be addressed might include: salary increase requirements, teacher job satisfaction, possible negative effect on family relationships, additional bus routes needed for young or handicapped students who cannot spend all day in school, would this amount of time in school require the system to provide an evening meal, the social effects to be expected as a consequence, with many other considerations to be listed. Districts could be encouraged to identify serious problems. By allowing each system to have input into policy development, the policy could then be designed by educators who have a broad knowledge base of accommodations and concerns necessary for wise decision making.

The future, as a result of advanced communication technology, holds a key to changing the way policy is developed for educators. This same key could also change future policy content to reflect ideas of a broader, au fait, education community. Telecommunication also makes the process of getting input an expeditious matter by circumventing postal service delays; thus, timely revisions and submissions would be made.

SpecialNet: An Exemplary Electronic Mail System For Educators

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) developed SpecialNet, a telecommunication service to be used by educators nationwide. NASDSE also uses SpecialNet to influence federal policy regarding special education programs. One example occurred during the 1986 Congressional session when NASDSE sent an electronic communication to all state directors of special education that outlined a proposed mandate for pre-school services and increased funding for special education programs. The message, sent at 1:06 p.m. on a Friday, asked for states to send letters, telegrams, and to make telephone calls to Congress in support of the legislation. The message was available to be read by all states at that time - 1:06 p.m. Florida's state director read the message two hours later and sent it on to all school districts in the state requesting their assistance in supporting the proposed federal legislation. It is important to note that, by using electronic mail, all state directors of special education, all administrators of exceptional student education programs in the state of Florida, and many other SpecialNet users, were reviewing a proposed policy BEFORE the United States House of Representatives or the Subcommittee on Select Education had seen the bill. This same process could be used to oppose legislation that would have a possible negative impact on those affected by the policy, as well as, a support system for helping to enact legislation with positive influence.

The persons affected most by policy or legislation throughout a state or within an organization may have little or no input into its development. In some cases most educators won't even be aware that regulatory changes are being made; yet, they will be responsible for policy implementation. During Florida's legislative session, the state maintains an electronic bulletin board called "LEGISLATION" that is available to all Floridians through the Florida Information Resources Network (FIRN), the states' own electronic mail system. Concerned citizens, special interest groups, lobbyists, local government officials, and any number of organizations interested in legislative activities can access "LEGISLATION" to determine the status of any bill, if it has been passed, proposed action, committee references, amendments, etc. After reviewing the status of a bill any concerned citizen can contact appropriate law makers, lobbyists, or other interested parties to support, oppose, or recommend changes.

The use of telecommunication is a powerful legislative/policy tool waiting to be discovered by the massive educational community. With the use of

telecommunication all educators can be kept up-to-date on precisely what is taking place in the policy development arena. Educators in remote areas can have just as much influence on policy making, via telecommunication, as those lobbying in the capital cities. Input from various sources, even though geographically isolated, can be achieved if decision makers share drafts of proposed regulations via an electronic medium and may subsequently accept the recommendations provided from these varied sources to be included in the policy development process.

To have input into the design of legislation is an opportunity for those responsible for its' implementation to be a real part of the overall process of both service mandates and delivery. Educators who have no input into policies or regulations may be viewed as pawns carrying out program plans designed by persons who are not necessarily educators, who are not directly involved with implementation, and who may or may not be cognizant of the implementation problems associated with the passing of any particular regulatory act. The end result of having input from the teaching community will be increased teacher job satisfaction.

The Florida Coalition for the Education of Exceptional Students (CEES) has used SpecialNet to announce items to be presented in the states' legislative session, to solicit financial contributions, and to encourage individuals to submit ideas for policy improvement for service delivery to exceptional students. The Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students, in turn, endorsed the efforts of CEES by disseminating CEES information via SpecialNet to encourage participation in the policy development process.

Telecommunication is an appropriate vehicle to be used by educational special interest groups in policy develop and design. With electronic mail the group can be very large, diverse, and geographically separated. The electronic medium provides an opportunity for educators to contact law and policy makers for necessary interpretations of law or policies, as well as, to determine the scope of, or impact of, implementing proposed laws and/or policies.

Local education agencies and other educational institutions have policy needs to surface which require technical assistance from other agencies, the state educational department, or from other states. For example, one state mental health agency encountered a sixteen year old male transfer student who dressed himself in female undergarments because, in his words, "they are a source of power." This particular agency sent an electronic message on SpecialNet requesting assistance from anyone with experience in dealing with transvestites. Although many readers may have thought the situation humorous, the persons dealing with the young man surely felt frustration. Those readers who had encountered such experiences and were knowledgeable offered assistance. This example is good, in that, this agency posed a question that was sure to attract jeers and negative remarks; yet, the staff was willing to look beyond a few cases of cynicism to request help for a student who was in desperate need of treatment.

In this case, telecommunication provided a number of treatment solutions to a life changing problem, from a nationwide audience, in a minimal amount of time. Most educators would exhaust their possible resources in such a case after three telephone calls and one letter. For these educators, SpecialNet proved to be a method of instant communication that located a number of respondents and resources.

Telecommunication

Unlike traditional methods of communication, telecommunication's utility is ad infinitum, in that, there are no parameters within which the user must be confined. The user is limited only by his/her own imagination and creativity. Initially, even the telephone was met with skepticism and wasn't seen as being worthwhile. And the automobile was thought to be too complicated. Today, however, we cannot envision ourselves in the work-world, nor our private lives, without the use of both. New advances are still being made on both the telephone and the automobile; therefore, continued advances can be assumed for telecommunication. Telecommunication, like automobiles and telephones, may be tailored to fit individual needs, e.g., cheap or expensive, simple or complex, new or used, and the comparisons go on.

An analogy of the value and cost-effectiveness of telecommunication can be made by comparing the computer industry (where telecommunication has its origin) to the automobile industry. If the automobile industry had made the same progress as the electronics industry since the invention of the transitor in 1947, today it would be possible to buy a Rolls Royce for less than $3.00 and drive it for a million miles on one gallon of gas. The telecommunication industry is producing major advancements that can be useful tools for educators. Educators have a vested interest in the future and should understand that today's productive imagination in the field of technology creates tomorrow's educational necessities. For education, advancements from simply the spoken word, to the use of the slate, to the printed page, to the computer, have all been basically instructional in nature. The possibilities for telecommunication far exceed instruction to include policy development and design for improved total service delivery.

There is a consideration which cannot be overlooked if a telecommunication system is going to work effectively. All of the responsible parties within an organization must have access and use the telecommunication system on a regular basis. The responsible governing agency should establish a policy requiring at least daily access, and preferably twice each day, to the electronic system. The governing agency should also ensure that appropriate personnel receive training and that on-going assistance is available. Telecommunication, as a means for communicating quickly and efficiently, has seen a dramatic increase in use by state agencies during the 80s. With a growing public awareness of pedagogical practices, educational organizations must, of necessity, pursue all avenues that

promise to make communication more expeditious. Even though using electronic mail applications for legislative and policy development is only a small portion of its many and varied useful applications, those educators charged with implementation may perceive it to be one of the most significant applications.

Summary

The need for information exchange has always been a paramount issue for educators. The fastest and least expensive method available is telecommunication. To help reduce communication time and costs for education programs SpecialNet is one of the best, if not the best, available communication systems. SpecialNet is a telecommunication service used by all states to some degree. SpecialNet should be selected by all educational organizations because it is an electronic mail system designed by educators for educators and is both a national and international service. The applicability, usefulness, cost-effectiveness, and planned future enhancements make SpecialNet the most appropriate and logical electronic mail service for the total field of education.

Information sharing between school districts, universities, departments of education, national offices, and international educators helps ensure that current issues are not only recognized but also provides many experts the opportunity of addressing the issues. By drawing on a variety of sources for information, the quality of all educational policies will become much improved. A large audience of diversified participants having input into any project increases the credibility of the product - legislation is no exception.

Electronic communication provides educators with the necessary immediate access tool for influencing policies and legislation at the local, state, and national levels. With the automation of communication we have the potential to increase and improve services to the people we as educators are dedicated to serving - students.

References

Wooten, Charles L. A Survey of the Use of SpecialNet for Conducting Special Education Communication in Florida. Doctoral Dissertation. The University of Alabama, 1985.